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UNCLAS LAGOS 000083

SIPDIS

STATE PASS DOT FOR KEVIN SAMPLE  
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: WORLD AIRWAYS SUSPENDS SERVICE, LEAVES  
PASSENGERS STRANDED

REF: (A) LAGOS 54, (B) LAGOS 31, (C) 03 ABUJA 2216

1. (U) Summary: World Airways recently announced the indefinite suspension of its charter flights between the United States and Nigeria. Company executives say World's booking agent, Ritetime Aviation and Travel Service, owes the airline nearly US \$2 million and argue that World cannot continue to operate charters without being paid. Unfortunately, this leaves 800 to 1,000 people stranded in Lagos with tickets that cannot be used on other airlines. Many have waited nearly two weeks in the hope that Ritetime would make good on its promises to send a plane, but as of Wednesday, January 14, no aircraft had appeared. Airport contacts reported random acts of violence on Tuesday, January 13, but airport officials denied the claims. End summary.

2. (U) World Airways announced the cancellation of its charter flights between the United States and Nigeria effective January 1, 2004. In its press release, World named Ritetime Aviation and Travel Service the "contractor and sole marketing agent" for its charter flights and said it had "no control over Ritetime's ticket sales or reservations," particularly when Ritetime sold tickets for flights beyond the December 31 expiration of its contract with World. The press release also stated that Ritetime had "not made its payments to World Airways." Under the circumstances, World executives say they had no choice but to discontinue services. The Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority sent a scathing message to World Airways calling on the airline to honor its commitment to passengers "to avert even more ugly scenes which can jeopardize good relations," but World executives chose not to respond to the letter.

3. (U) The airline's decision leaves 800 to 1,000 people stranded, all of them holding charter tickets that cannot be used on other airlines. Twenty-nine people returned to the United States on a Transatlantic Airlines flight, and others may board charter flights from Lagos to Accra and from there to New York later this week, but many stranded passengers are still looking for a way home. International flights from Lagos are almost completely booked until mid-January. In its press release, World Airways expressed its "genuine apologies for any inconvenience" but said there was nothing it could do. Company executives say World will not send rescue flights, particularly when passengers in Lagos and New York are becoming increasingly agitated. As of Tuesday, January 13, there appeared to be a solution: Ritetime had allegedly chartered a European Airways plane to ferry passengers from Lagos to Accra and on to New York at no extra charge. However, as of Wednesday, January 14, no aircraft had appeared.

4. (U) Comment: World Airways executives have expressed interest in finding another booking agent and re-introducing charter flights in four to six months - the Lagos-New York route is potentially one of the airline's most lucrative - but World's damaged reputation will make this difficult. The Nigerian press has repeatedly castigated the airline, GON officials have expressed disappointment in World's decision to cancel its flights, and the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority has expressed anger at the airline's refusal to rescue stranded passengers. World Airways executives will meet GON officials later this month, but even this may not be enough to salvage the airline's reputation. Whether or not World re-enters the market, other U.S. air carriers are lining up to take its place. Continental Airlines has made serious inquiries, and KLM reports that Northwest will start a Lagos to Detroit run in June or July 2004. End comment.

HINSON-JONES